

# INDICATOR South Africa

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA:  
SOME EVIDENCE FOR A FUTURE SCENARIO

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## ISSUE FOCUS

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#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Extensive research among a sample of black industrial workers in Durban is reported on. A majority was unionised and had been involved in the "pensions" disturbances. Comparisons are made with non-unionised unskilled migrant workers.

- The evidence shows very clearly that the attitudes to work and the general consciousness of unionised black workers is slightly more favourable to management and to the firms in which they are employed than is the case among non-unionised migrants. No evidence of a political consciousness invading the workplace was found in the results.

- The results suggest that black worker solidarity and determination during labour disputes is based on very practical and economic considerations, among union members and others.

- Evidence also suggests, however, that race relations and communication in industry can be improved, and that problems for management exist in this area.

- Our results also show that black employees, migrant workers more so than fully urban unionised workers, feel alienated from and mistrust white institutions generally. A need for political involvement might exist which could make the black worker feel more a part of the modern industrial society.

- The impression given by the results, is that politically-based instability in the workplace is not likely in the near future.

- The present educational level of black industrial workers is very low, however. The educational level will rise rapidly in the next two decades. This factor, more than unionisation, is likely to introduce a new consciousness into the workplace. By then credible channels of responsible political participation will be very necessary to protect Industrial Relations from political disruption.

1. Attempting to outline a future scenario on any topic as complex as Industrial Relations is almost by definition a foolish and futile exercise, if the scenario is to be taken as a highly probable future outcome. Scenario-building is useful, however, in the sense that the exercise in itself helps to crystallise the most important questions which should be asked about the present. Scenario-building helps to order and arrange policy-oriented thinking.

There are perhaps three basic ways of establishing evidence for future scenarios. One is extrapolating current trends in labour disputes and related activity. A problem here is that such activity is highly cyclical. At the moment, for example, labour conflict is suppressed by the economic recession, with its high unemployment and job-insecurity among black workers.

Another is examining the intentions and policies of management and trade unionists. A problem in this regard is that both sets of decision-makers often deviate from their stated or private policies when conflict actually occurs. Generally, whatever their policies, both parties tend to become pragmatic in situations of labour conflict, seeking to optimise advantages or minimise costs to their respective organisations. Unless either organised labour or management becomes completely dominant in the labour economy, both will frequently have to act in ways contrary to intentions or ideologies.

A third approach is to examine the consciousness and orientation of the workers, as perhaps the major carriers of the action in Industrial Relations. Workers as a collectivity, however, do not take policy decisions as such — they tend to react to opportunity or frustration.

All three of the above approaches should be employed in scenario-building, with the addition of a great deal of informed intuition. Few forecasters have access to all the required

information, however. The best that any individual author can do is to make available his evidence to readers, allowing them to combine it with other insights and to make their own forecasts.

This paper is an attempt to provide evidence for labour-relations analyses, in this case data of the third kind described above, relating to the attitudes and orientations of black workers in South Africa. Only very tentative forecasting will be attempted. The evidence is drawn from an intensive study among some 500 black industrial workers in Durban.<sup>1)</sup>

## 2. BASIC ELEMENTS IN CURRENT TRENDS

### 2.1 Black Worker Consciousness

The most recent phase of black worker activism began in the early seventies. The new labour dispensation, with formal recognition of black unions by the state, is nearly four years old. The growing labour organisation in recent years has coincided with general political activity among blacks on a more intensive and widespread scale than was characteristic of the nineteen-seventies and the late sixties. The point being made is that black worker consciousness has had a fair time, and sufficient stimulation, as it were, to develop any qualities sharply antagonistic to capital, if this were to be a dominant future trend.

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1) 532 Black workers were interviewed largely in five major companies but including a control sample of 80 employees from a diverse range of 50 companies, all in the Natal region. The study, which is presently being written up is intended to provide an in-depth understanding of the "Pensions" disturbances of 1981-82. The respondents were interviewed by trained black university personnel, and had a clear understanding that their individual replies would not be communicated to management. Generally very frank and forthright answers were obtained.

The workplaces of the sample were all firms in the manufacturing sector. Just over one-third were typical hostel-dwelling migrants and the other two-thirds lived in a variety of circumstances in and around Durban, but mainly in township housing. They had worked in their present job for an average of roughly seven years, their average educational level was Std. 4 and their average age roughly 37 years. A substantial proportion (65%) were union members or exposed to union activity.

In previous papers<sup>1)</sup> I have argued that a tendency towards sharply "adversary" attitudes or a marked ideological flavour to black labour consciousness is not evident in the main.

A variety of items in a guided interview schedule for the current study related to what may be termed a "political worker consciousness". For example, they were asked: *"If a well-respected black political leader wished to show his strength and he were to ask workers to stay away from work for two weeks, thinking of people like yourself - would all workers stay away, almost all, only some, very few or none."* (Items are slightly paraphrased.) An item like this, in a "projective form" allows respondents to give frank answers without incriminating themselves. The form of the question has been tested. The same was asked if a *"union wished to show its strength"*. The results are compared with results obtained from a large sample of over 600 migrant workers nationwide in 1982. Results in table I below, as well as in subsequent tables, are presented separately for trade union members, and for workers who were involved in labour disputes (mainly "pensions" strikes) prior to the study.

TABLE I: Workers' Prediction of a Call for a Two-Week Demonstration Strike:

	by respected Political leader				by a Union		
	Durban Workers 1983		Migrants 1982		Durban Workers 1983		
	Union Mem- bers		Dispute Exper- ience		Union Mem- bers		
	All	%	All	%	All	%	%
All/almost all would stay away	32	33	31	20	32	37	31
Only some	34	34	34	49	32	30	31
Few or none	32	32	33	29	34	31	34
n <sup>2)</sup>	532	341	454	670			

1) See, for example, L. Schlemmer, *The Socio-political Function of Trade Unions: An Assessment of Possibilities in South African Setting*, Durban, Centre for Applied Social Sciences 1982.

2) The sample sizes remain constant for subsequent tables.

These results show that a minority, albeit a large one, of some one-third give a response sympathetic to political activism in the black workforce. Predictably in the urban worker sample it is higher than among rank-and-file migrant workers, but not very dramatically so. The union members are only slightly more inclined to support a strike call by a union leader than others.

The workers in the recent Durban sample, who were members of trade unions, were asked to discuss the advantages and benefits of trade union membership. The answers were probed so as to obtain as deep as possible an insight into the motivations in worker organisation. The following table reflects the ordering of motivations.

TABLE II: Reasons for Trade Union Association. Rank Order, 1st rank = 100

Reason	Rank weight	
	Union Members	Dispute Experience
Presentation/negotiation of collective grievances	100	100
Protection of individual in disciplinary situation	96	92
Fighting for "workers' rights"	17	16
Guidance to workers	14	13
Personal assistance for workers	13	13

These results show that the motivation for trade union association is dominantly practical and strategic. The more abstract, or "ideological" factor of the promotion of "workers' rights" comes far down in the rank-ordering.

The respondents were also presented with a range of options and asked which would be *"most valuable for black workers in South Africa"*. The factors presented were deliberately mixed.

TABLE III: Resource Considered to be Most Valuable to Black Workers in South Africa

Resource	All	Rank weight	
		Union Members	Dispute Experience
Freedom to seek work anywhere	100	100	100
More education	91	81	91
More training	63	57	65
Strong, powerful black leader	35	35	36
The franchise for Parliament	33	34	29
Strong Trade Union	31	35	31
Active work in a political organisation	6	5	5

Here even more clearly the essentially pragmatic, job-advancement oriented consciousness shows itself. The political resources are all down-rated compared with those things which equip a worker to seek his own advancement. Broadly speaking union members and those recently involved in disturbances do not deviate from the overall trend.

Since a majority of the respondents in the recent Durban survey had been involved in labour action in connection with the pensions issue, it was relatively easy to discuss labour unrest. They were asked about the possibility of future strikes in the workplace and most saw such possibilities in the future at some stage. We probed for the reasons they saw for such future action.

TABLE IV: Reasons for Possible Future Strike in Workplace

Reason (in categories)	All	Rank weight	
		Union Members	Dispute Experience
Wage issues	100	100	100
Worker-management communications or relations	41	47	43
Pension-related issues	32	30	34
Race relations, discrimination	32	37	39
Working conditions	25	25	22
Political or community issues	3	3	3

There can be little doubt from these results that political or ideological motivations are largely absent in this group. Among union members and those recently involved in strikes, problems of communication and race relations figure somewhat more prominently than in other employees. Nevertheless, the sentiments associated with strikes are what one could call active — over 50 percent of the respondents in general and some 60 percent of union members, indicated that they would be "very willing" to join a future hypothetical strike. Wages, obviously are the dominant issue.

Yet the "wage consciousness" of these workers can only be described as moderate. After establishing their present wage they were asked what their wage should be considering their skills and the work they did. They were also asked for the minimum needed for consumer wants.

TABLE V: Present Wage, Wage Workers' Judge to be Appropriate to Themselves and their Jobs, and Wage considered to be a Minimum for Consumer needs

	Durban Study			Migrants Nationwide (weekly only)
	1983			1982
	(averaged replies)			(averaged replies)
	All	Union Members	Dispute Experience	
Present wage	R73 pw	R75 pw	R72 pw	R44
Appropriate wage	R91 pw	R91 pw	R89 pw	R75
ratio	1 to 1,2	1 to 1,2	1 to 1,2	1 to 1,7
Minimum needed	R114 pw	R112 pw	R105 pw	R105
ratio	1 to 1,5	1 to 1,5	1 to 1,5	1 to 2,4

It is very surprising that in a group of highly unionised workers like those in the Durban study, who have experience of labour action, the psychological wage standards are closer to their actual wages than among migrant workers who were almost totally non-unionised. The difference in the ratios in the table are obviously due more to the absolute levels of wages than to worker consciousness.



A further set of items reflects the perceptions of wages in relative terms. Using a well-proven technique of giving a list of five statements of degrees of happiness - unhappiness, attached to faces with happy - unhappy expressions, respondents were asked to rate their lives as a whole, political conditions, money circumstances and their jobs. The results are in Table VI.

TABLE VI: Happiness-Unhappiness with Life, Jobs, Money Circumstances and Politics

	Very happy	Just happy	Neutral	Unhappy	Angry impatient
	%	%	%	%	%
Life as a whole	16	30	30	15	9
Political situation	2	8	40	27	18
Conditions in all parts of job	17	26	27	21	8
Money circumstances	5	11	16	46	21

These results show that the financial circumstances of workers generate more intense frustration than even the political situation. Their jobs in general, on the other hand, reveal much the same profile as life in general.

All these results, incidentally, show a much lower level of political consciousness than cross sections of urban middle-lower-middle class blacks polled in other surveys.

Perhaps one can sum up on the wages issue by saying that the black workers typified in this study were aware of their low bargaining position for high wages because of low education and job-skills, but that financial constraints are intensely felt and would always be high on their agenda as industrial and unionised workers.

Generally-speaking however, whatever the intensity of material needs, there is very little consistent evidence of a politicised worker consciousness of an ideological kind having developed over the past ten years.

## 2.2 Black Worker reaction to Job Conditions

In the recent Durban study, a range of reactions was obtained to a wide variety of aspects of the working environment. These can be compared with similar reactions among two large labour forces of non-unionised workers; one a rural worker sample in Natal and the other a nation-wide sample in a service industry. Neither of the two comparison labour forces had evinced labour unrest.

TABLE VII: Dissatisfaction with Elements in the Job Situation

(Item: "Is (aspect) as good as you would like, as good as you would expect for the kind of work, or not as good as you would expect". The last choice is taken as an index of dissatisfaction.)

Aspect of Working Life	Percentage Dissatisfaction				
	Durban sample			Rural Workers	Service industry
	All	Union Mem- bers	Dispute Exper- ience		
	%	%	%	%	%
Wages	74	73	75	76	70
Progress and promotion	45	45	45	52	45
Company understanding of worker problems	43	39	42	33	not asked
Consultation	39	35	37	not asked	34
Amount of work	36	37	34	49	21
Pension arrangements	36	38	37	not asked	25
Fairness in discipline	35	33	33	28	30
Opportunities to complain	35	30	32	33	not asked
Behaviour of superiors	31	31	30	18	34
Old age provision	31	32	31	not asked	not asked
Leave benefits	25	29	26	not asked	13
Training for job	24	24	25	19	41
Accommodation (if hostel)	24	22	26	34	not asked
Sick benefits	23	26	24	42	44
Hours of work	20	17	19	55	25
Safety on job	20	15	19	29	not asked
Attitude of company to union/shop-steward	19	19	19	not asked	not asked
Supervisors knowledge	16	17	16	14	not asked
Shop-steward communication	12	10	11	not asked	not asked
Relations with workmates	6	6	7	7	13
n	532	341	454	856	600

In making comparisons, we should remember that the Durban study was among a dominantly unionised group, the majority of whom had been involved in disputes. The rural sample is far more typical of workers in South Africa's industrial past - non-unionised and subject to paternalistic management. The service industry is modern with no large collectivities of workers to allow a consciousness to develop.

The results, however, show that the Durban sample does not have a generally higher profile of discontent. In fact, the non-unionised rural workers display most dissatisfaction, with particular grievances being hours of work and the heaviness of their work. The service industry sample shows a profile roughly comparable to the Durban workers, with the exception of the fact that sick benefits and job training are issues which arouse great discontent.

A few additional aspects of the reactions to the workplace in the Durban sample may be relevant. Sixty percent of union members felt that the company made it easy for the black union to operate, and only 22 percent perceived a very resistant, hostile management.

Over 90 percent in the Durban sample would like to remain with their present employers, although most would like promotion. This reflects a surprisingly high degree of company commitment. This may have been due to the economic recession and shortage of jobs, however.

Respondents were probed about the amount of support they perceived themselves getting from various quarters.

TABLE VIII: Perception of Satisfactory Support as an Employee

Persons giving support in employment situation	All	Union Members	Dispute Experience
	%	%	%
Fellow workers	73	76	73
Shop-steward/Trade Union	69	81	70
Personnel officer and staff	60	62	61
Foreman	53	52	54
Liaison Committee (where relevant)	54	56	56
Supervisors	50	50	51
Induna	50	53	49

These results suggest that while there is a difference between the union support and management support, it is not a clear cleavage reflecting a hostile perception of management. Union members are perhaps most inclined to feel supported by fellow workers or by the trade union, but even among this group no marked rejection of management personnel is evident.

### 2.3 Some Danger Signs

There are aspects of our results, not only in the Durban sample, but also in the national sample of migrant workers, which are less-comforting to industry, however. We asked "*Which of the following is true of most factory managements where black workers are employed*". Note that the question is in the general, abstract form of "management". The following "image" of management appears to hold, as seen in Table IX.

TABLE IX: Image of Management in General

	Durban sample			Migrants nation- wide
	All	Union Mem- bers	Dispute Exper- ience	
	%	%	%	%
<u>Positive:</u>				
Help blacks by providing work	76	78	77	69
Listen to grievances	48	53	51	na
Pay as much as can	53	54	53	38
Help blacks by appealing to government	16	16	17	10
<u>Negative:</u>				
Get as much work for as little pay	85	84	84	91
Try to replace blacks with machines	65	66	64	83
Run to police in labour disputes	58	57	58	90
Never consult before changing rules	64	66	64	na
Work with and support government	50	50	47	78

Clearly from these results the image of management in general is that it is part of a hostile establishment. It is noteworthy, however, that the Durban sample and even the union members are more positive to management than the migrant workers, who although less unionised and less politicised, are so marginal and out of contact with management that even more unfavourable attitudes to management develop.

Another aspect of note in our results emerges in response to a question on the "trust" which black employees have of various relevant institutions. In Table X we present the proportions expressing Full trust or No trust in various "white" institutions.

TABLE X: Degree of Trust in White Institutions

	Full Trust			No Trust		
	All	Union Mem- bers	Dispute Exper- ience	All	Union Mem- bers	Dispute Exper- ience
		%	%		%	%
Banks	71	74	72	6	5	5
Black Trade union	50	64	53	11	5	10
KwaZulu Government	46	49	45	14	13	15
Building Societies	45	48	45	13	10	12
Insurance Companies	29	31	29	28	26	27
Pension funds	28	28	27	32	35	34
White management	25	25	25	36	34	37
U.I.F.	23	19	21	26	30	27
White government	17	16	18	48	48	47

Here we have a singular example of a basic problem, not only in South Africa as a whole, but in Industrial Relations — a basic problem of lack of trust in the institutional framework. This will be discussed in due course. What is noteworthy is the fact that union members, while they have higher trust in trade unions, also have a slightly more positive image of the KwaZulu Government than others. Generally, however, the trade union members are unique in their attitudes to the institutional framework.

Finally, in considering the basic evidence of trends among black workers, we need to note that some 60 percent of those interviewed in the Durban sample felt that they were discriminated against in the workplace. Here we exclude those who ascribed the discrimination to a lack of education or training. This is also an indication of a serious problem.

### 3. SOME PROBABLE PATTERNS

The research evidence presented thusfar gives a fairly clear indication that rank and file black labour is not becoming systematically politicised or radicalised, even among groups which have had exposure

to industrial conflict and to intensive labour organisation. There are however other considerations as well.

The radicalisation of the black labour movement is unlikely to occur very rapidly as long as a majority have low skills and hence low industrial bargaining power. In a labour-surplus economy the insecurity of the semi-skilled and unskilled labour force is likely to remain sufficiently pervasive to inhibit the formation of a confrontationist outlook. While many employers believe that they have seen evidence of a spirit of confrontation in industrial disputes, the enthusiasm of black labour in the collective unrest which has occurred thusfar probably has to be seen in another light.

The powerful material needs and aspirations of the black workers in South Africa have produced remarkable solidarity from 1972/3 onwards. Solidarity also comes fairly easily to the very homogeneous black labour forces typical in South African industry. A sense of distinctive identity as black workers in opposition to white management probably also adds strength to the collective action. There is no doubt that a sense of the possibilities in solidarity has become part of the black labour scene. However, this is definitely not to be confused with a radical or politicised worker consciousness.

Put very bluntly, the strikes that take place among black workers are generally what are termed instrumental or economic. Thusfar we have not seen what are termed "control strikes", with the aim of countervailing the authority or the coherence of management.

This clear distinction between the political and the material interests of black people is fairly well established in recent history. During the 1976 township disturbances, as well as in other community disturbances subsequently, there has been very little evidence of support for the township demonstrators' actions among workers in the industrial setting. Here one must make some distinction between bus boycotts and community disturbances; the former do

involve workers very directly and some relationship to absenteeism must exist almost by definition.

Furthermore, the Zimbabwean experience before independence also suggested that such a distinction exists, since there were very few labour disturbances of a political kind in the last few years of intensified black political struggle (although earlier evidence of this may have existed).

The pattern of black strike activity also seems to be responsive to factors in the economic cycle. This also suggests an economic or instrumental basis for labour action.

The question which has been posed thusfar is whether or not a political factor is directly present in black labour action. All the evidence seems to indicate that this is not so and that it is unlikely in the near to medium term future. Political factors can have indirect effects however, and in the South African situation these can be very powerful. The following points are possibly relevant.

Political factors can increase the determination or the intensity of action among workers even in a purely economic strike or dispute. It seems to be popular knowledge that the level of labour action in the Eastern Cape has been very high at times in relative terms. Although the official reports on these strikes all list economic or work related factors as the causes, it would seem plausible to suggest that the highly politicised consciousness of workers in that region could increase the propensity for action which is in itself not politically motivated.

In Section 2 reference was made to the common view among black workers that racial discrimination against them exists in the workplace and that communication problems were important in causing labour unrest. A perception such as this must inevitably increase the polarisation that exists between management and workers



simply by virtue of workplace authority structure. The normal structural conflict of interests between management and workers becomes aggravated by the additional factor of poor race relations.

Other evidence in the previous section pointed to the lack of trust in white-run institutions, with the exception of purely financial agencies. This weakness in the credibility of major public institutions must inevitably have some effects on labour relations. Here one need only think of Industrial Councils, of statutory commissions and of the likely credibility of mediation services if they were to become too closely associated with management.

Another trend is perhaps of even greater significance than those already referred to. It will be remembered that the average educational level of the typical industrial workers in the Durban sample was Std. 4. Today we are seeing a very large increase in the number of black school-leavers with Std. 8 or Std. 10 qualifications. These school-leavers are going to experience ever greater difficulty in obtaining white collar work and many will gravitate to work in production. Their political consciousness will be very different from that which has been typical of production workers up to now. In the past we have seen in Durban and elsewhere a positive hostility between unskilled workers and the highly political black student formations. Once more and more of the self-same students obtain work in industry the possibility of growing solidarity with the activist students must arise.

#### 4. A SUMMARY VIEW OF A POSSIBLE FUTURE

South Africa's economy will have a labour surplus for a long time to come. Given this fact, as well as the fact that the prevailing black worker consciousness is very pragmatic at this point means that the sphere of Industrial Relations will not be readily usurped by political or ideological forces. At the same time, however, there are factors, like poor race relations in

industry, as well as a growing consciousness of political goals outside the workplace which will increase the conviction associated with labour action, even though the goals of such action will not be political in themselves.

These probable developments lend credence to the oft-repeated argument that labour relations are likely to be adversely affected if no alternative outlets for political aspirations become available to black people. Political reform seems unlikely in the near future, however. The lack of credibility in the political system for blacks as well as the lack of trust in basic public institutions means that Industrial Relations will have to develop in a rather unsupportive climate, both politically and institutionally. Of particular note is the very poor image of management which black workers seem to have.

While there is no basis for predicting a political transformation of Industrial Relations, a toughening climate of industrial action does seem probable, particularly in periods of economic prosperity when the labour surplus is reduced.

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